

DALMATIAN

Native to: Europe.

Bred to: Trot over long distances.

Breed characteristics: Strong, hard pads, stamina, good lung capacity and short coat, preventing overheating.

Alison Burgess, horse Jacko and Tally set out for a ride.

Ali Rumney, Monty and Demi show off their paces during a speed test.

Miranda Purves works her team of Fell ponies with carriage dog Splash.

Miranda Purves has been working with her carriage dog, Splash, for four years. "Carriage dogs are traditionally named after something to do with the equipage," says Miranda. "My Splash is named for the carriage splash boards."

Already an accomplished carriage driver, she wanted Splash specifically to train as a carriage dog, working alongside her team of Fell ponies.

The carriage dog tests also consist of a series of obedience exercises, followed by a long cross-country section, and Splash must keep close to the carriage in the same way as a road dog.

"I'd really encourage anyone who owns Dalmatians to look into teaming up with carriage drivers and riders, even if they don't own horses themselves," says Alison.

"I often take out non-horsey owners as grooms on the back of the carriage and the dogs run with us. Most Dalmatians take to it very well – of the many dogs that have attempted the society instinct test, we've only had a tiny percentage drop out."

Alison Burgess, of the British Carriage Dog Society, has always been fascinated by Dalmatians and had her first dog around 15 years ago. She now works her four-year-old bitch, Tally, regularly, alongside her ride-and-drive cob Jacko.

"The origins and original purpose of the Dalmatian are shrouded in mystery, but it probably started as a hunting dog somewhere in Europe," says Alison. "They seem to have a natural affinity with horses and have been used in the UK as carriage dogs since at least the 18th century.

"Many contemporary coachmen and carriage drivers liked to have a Dalmatian trotting ahead of the vehicle, to give warning of and deter any footpads or highwaymen – my friend always says they were the first car alarms!"

In 2006, Alison helped to form the British Carriage Dog Society, which runs annual trials to demonstrate the

Dalmatian's traditional role as a companion to horses and carriages, in the context of a modern competition.

The competitions are split into two classes – "road dogs", for dogs working with a single rider, and "carriage dogs", for those working with carriages.

Ali Rumney's Dalmatian, Demi, is a silver level road dog, working alongside Ali's 16hh Appaloosa, Monty. The road tests consist of five obedience exercises, including ignoring distractions and staying close to the horse, and a speed test. The dog must pass these tests before continuing to an endurance ride, which can be up to 40km.

"We have a disadvantage here, as Demi is very small for a Dalmatian and I have a large horse!" says Ali, with a laugh. "My dogs, including Demi's mother, Domino, hack out with me across the downs for miles, so I have to be confident I have them under control."

The British Carriage Dog Society will soon have approved instinct testers around the UK, so, if you're interested in finding out whether your dog has the makings of a carriage dog, log on to www.carriagedog.org.